



VA Research Currents

Secretary vows VA will protect inventions

Secretary of Veterans Affairs Anthony J. Principi, speaking April 12 in Arlington, Va., at a national meeting focused on VA's new technology transfer program, pledged his full support for the effort. He cited VA's former policy of not pursuing ownership of intellectual property generated by its researchers as a major reason many Americans do not know about VA's research achievements and leadership in medical science.

"This must not stand. This will not stand," Mr. Principi told the audience of university officials and VA administrators, investigators and attorneys. "From this day on, the Department of

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Magnuson Award to Dr. Peckham of Cleveland, leader in functional electrical stimulation

P. Hunter Peckham, PhD, director of the Rehabilitation R&D Center for Functional Electrical Stimulation (FES) and the Cleveland FES Center, received the Magnuson Award, VA's highest honor for rehabilitation investigators, at this year's technology transfer meeting.

Dr. Peckham is noted for his work in restoring motor function to those paralyzed by spinal cord injury. He pioneered the development of "Freehand," an artificial nerve system that enables the user to grasp objects. The unit works by sending electrical signals from an implant in the chest to electrodes in the muscles of the forearm and hand. The result is new independence for patients who had lost the use of their hands. Freehand is the first device of its kind to gain approval from the Food and Drug Administration.

"Through Dr. Peckham's leadership, use of FES to activate paralyzed muscles has moved from science fiction to reality," said Mindy Aisen, MD, director of Rehabilitation R&D, in presenting the award to

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Update from Health Services Research and Development...

Initiative with National Cancer Institute among recent QUERI milestones

By John G. Demakis, MD
Director, HSR&D

This is an exciting time to provide an update on the Quality Enhancement Research Initiative! It has been just three years since Drs. Feussner and Kizer [Chief Research and Development Officer John R. Feussner, MD, MPH; and former Under Secretary for Health Kenneth W. Kizer, MD, MPH] first *imagined* this systematic approach to quality improvement, coined the term "QUERI," and gave leadership of the program to HSR&D. We are very proud of the level of activity now under way and the important findings and products that are beginning to emerge.

For a set of diseases and clinical conditions that are

significant among veterans, the QUERI approach starts by identifying best practices and important gaps in knowledge. Drawing on the expertise of VA investigators, clinicians, and policy makers, between October 1998 and 2000 HSR&D issued one or more solicitations for research proposals in each of QUERI's eight clinical areas. To date, this virtual storm of solicitations has resulted in *40 new HSR&D investigator-initiated and service-directed research projects, plus at least 94 Coordinating Center projects*, addressing a range of questions related to improving the processes and outcomes of care.

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Secretary (cont. from pg. 1)

Veterans Affairs is going to get credit for the work our researchers have done, and are doing. If that work results in financial gain, we are going to use that gain on behalf of the veterans we serve.”

Mr. Principi said that as secretary he must be able to point to well-known successes to support future funding requests.

The new technology transfer program will do much to address those problems by evaluating inventions, educating researchers about their rights and obligations, obtaining patents, and bringing new products to market, he said. He also said that inter-institutional agreements will ensure that VA and its affiliated universities will both benefit from inventions that they own jointly.

On a related topic, Mr. Principi called on researchers to take every possible opportunity to mention their VA affiliations when publishing their work in professional journals or discussing it with the news media. This is a policy that has been emphasized by the Office of Research and Development.

“It is vital to the success of VA research that we receive the credit we are entitled to,” Mr. Principi said. “Be proud of your VA affiliation. If the

situation calls for it, do what you must to make sure it is mentioned prominently.”

Other speakers at the meeting included Chief Research and Development Officer John R. Feussner, MD, MPH; Deputy Under Secretary for Health Frances M. Murphy, MD, MPH; General Counsel Tim McClain, JD; Mindy L. Aisen, MD, director of Rehabilitation Research and Development and Technology Transfer; and keynote speaker Duncan Moore, professor of optical engineering at the University of Rochester. ■

Magnuson (cont. from pg. 1)

Dr. Peckham.

Dr. Aisen also quoted from a letter of recommendation submitted by William Heetderks, MD, PhD, scientific director for Repair and Plasticity at the National Institute of Neurological Disorders and Stroke: “Dr. Peckham is a caring PhD clinician whose work is greatly appreciated by the disabled individuals he is helping, highly respected by the academic community, and broadly recognized by the general society as having significant benefit.”

The Magnuson Award was established in 1998 in honor of Paul B. Magnuson, MD, a bone and joint surgeon and Chief Medical Director for VA in the post World War II era. He initiated VA’s university-affiliation model and was known for his dedication to finding innovative and individualized solutions for patients with disabilities. Magnuson Award winners receive a \$5,000 cash award and a plaque, along with an additional \$50,000 per year for three years to support a currently funded, nationally peer-reviewed research project. ■

Study to look at prevalence, risk factors of Hepatitis C

A new VA cooperative study, beginning this month, will assess the prevalence of Hepatitis C Virus (HCV) among VA patients and investigate factors that may be correlated with the infection.

Researchers will administer a risk-factor questionnaire and take blood samples from up to 4,000 veterans at 20 VA medical centers across the nation. The 18-month study is chaired by Jason A. Dominitz, MD, MHS, and Edward J. Boyko, MD, MPH, both of Seattle.

VA already has in place testing, counseling and treatment programs for HCV, which affects nearly four million Americans—1.8 percent of the population—and is four to five times more prevalent among veterans, particularly from the Vietnam era. Symptoms of the chronic disease caused by HCV often do not occur until 10 to 30 years after the infection.

Based on data from earlier VA research and other sources, including a national HCV screening day in 1999 during which more than 26,000 veterans were tested, VA estimates that 7 to 10 percent of its patients are infected. More than 50 percent of veterans receiving liver transplants in VA hospitals were found to have the virus.

The majority of cases of HCV have been linked to blood transfusions. The new study will examine a range of other factors that may play a role in the spread of the infection, including age, gender, race, marital status, education, income, period and location of military service, intravenous and intranasal drug use, tattoos, and sexual habits. ■

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Research Week marked at VA medical centers across nation

Poster exhibits and symposia, award ceremonies, visits from local reporters—these were among the highlights of events that took place at VA medical centers from Portland to San Juan in recognition of National VA Research Week, April 15–21. Other centers will be hosting special “Research Day” events in the coming months. At least 50 centers are expected to participate this year.

A Research Week proclamation signed by Secretary of Veterans Affairs Anthony Principi refers to VA Research as playing a “vital role in the delivery of high-quality, cost-effective care for the nation’s veterans” and making “significant contributions to advances in diagnosis and treatment of disease and disability.”

Selected Research Week highlights:

- In **Hines** (Ill.), Rep. Luis Gutierrez, a member of the House Veterans Affairs Committee, presented research awards to two high school

seniors who will be mentored by VA investigators during their college careers. On hand was John G. Demakis, MD, director of Health Services Research and Development.

- The **Richmond** (Va.) VAMC hosted hundreds of veterans who have taken part in past research projects at the center during its annual “Subjects Appreciation Day.”

- **Nashville** conducted an all-day program with segments on VA’s “Research Training Initiative for Historically Black Colleges and Universities and Hispanic-Serving Institutions” and presentations by researchers. Michael Cohen, PhD, deputy director of Medical Research Service, was among the speakers.

- At the **Manchester** (N.H.) VAMC, guests viewed a tape of a NBC Nightly News segment on posttraumatic stress disorder that had been filmed mainly at the center.

- The **Albuquerque** VAMC held a “Town Hall” meeting with representatives from Congress, veterans organizations and the military, along with patients and staff.

- **Iowa City** hosted a daylong event featuring “minisymposia” and remarks by Paul M. Hoffman, MD, director of VA’s Medical Research Service.

- **Portland** featured presentations on its top research findings in 2000, and honored retiring investigator Frederick J. Seil, MD. Michael Cohen, PhD, deputy director of Medical Research Service, was on hand for the ceremony.

- **Sepulveda** featured remarks by James Burris, MD, Deputy Chief Research and Development Officer; and honored Lisa V. Rubenstein, MD, MPH, director of the Center for the Study of Healthcare Provider Behavior and winner of the 2001 Under Secretary’s Award for Outstanding Achievement in Health Services Research. ■

Mentoring program prepares students for medical research careers

Visitors to the Hampton, Va., VAMC during Research Week heard presentations by participants in the center’s Honors Research and Mentorship Program, which since 1986 has helped 45 students on the road to careers as medical researchers.

Susan Lamb, a senior at Virginia’s New Horizons Governor’s School for Science and Technology, is one of six students from the school currently in the program, spending at least five hours weekly under the tutelage of VA researchers. Recently, she presented her findings on the role of the protein SMAD7 in cirrhosis at the Sakharov Readings, an international symposium for young scientists sponsored annually by Russia’s Department of Education.

Ms. Lamb is mentored by biochemist Jerome Seyer, PhD, a career scientist at the Hampton VAMC whose

work has focused on alcoholic liver disease. “I have loved mentoring under Dr. Seyer,” said Ms. Lamb. “At the VA hospital, I have been able to experience real research and have found it fascinating. I have decided to study micro and cellular biology, thanks to Dr. Seyer’s influence.”

Says Dr. Seyer: “This is an extremely gratifying experience for the mentor. We choose a mutually acceptable topic that can be completed within the time frame of the program. The students write up the proposal using published manuscripts and the Internet. They conduct the proposed experiments and present the completed project at the end of the school year. I am always amazed at how much they learn and comprehend during this short period of time. The final reward is when they are accepted into the college of their choice and continue their interests in research.” ■

HSR&D (cont. from pg. 1)

Rapid development of QUERI has been possible due to the hard work of many people and the active participation and support of many offices within VHA. We are particularly pleased that, through collaboration between the Office of Research and Development and the Office of Quality and Performance, it has been possible to secure medical care funds for the support of an *additional* 10 QUERI projects focused on translating research findings into practice.

I am also pleased to report that QUERI's progress and promise have not gone unnoticed *outside* of VA. In the last few months, interest in our work has led to at least two significant developments. First, enthusiasm for QUERI's systematic approach to quality improvement has resulted in a novel agreement with the National Cancer Institute through which NCI will work with us on a new NCI/VA QUERI initiative. Applications have already been received from VA facilities competing for this NCI-funded Cancer QUERI Center. Second, a new Institute of Medicine report that

focuses largely on what is *wrong* with health care in the U.S. today cites QUERI as an exception. According to the Institute of Medicine, the Veterans Health Administration has offered "one of the strongest examples of synthesizing the evidence base and applying it to clinical care." ("Crossing the Quality Chasm," p. 103.)

We expect to announce the new VA/NCI Cancer QUERI Center in June. Visit www.va.gov/resdev/queri.htm for a wide range of information about QUERI, including links to individual QUERI Centers. ■

Notify R&D Communications of your publications

VHA policy requires that research services at VA medical centers notify R&D Communications when findings are accepted for publication or presentation. Notices may be sent by e-mail to researchinfo@vard.org or by fax to (410) 962-0084. A revised version of the policy on notification and acknowledgment of VA support is on the R&D website at www.va.gov/resdev/directive/webinstruct2a.htm.

Wanted: Photos of VA researchers in action

VA's R&D Communications Office is seeking photos for use in the 2001 Office of Research and Development annual report. The photos should be high-resolution color images, supplied either as 35mm slides, prints, or digital files, showing research staff at work. They should be photojournalistic in style—that is, not posed snapshots—and portray investigators conducting research in the lab or in clinical settings.

Images must be received by July 2, 2001, to be considered for use in the annual report. For further details—including samples of photos used in last year's annual report—or to submit your new photos for the 2001 annual report, contact R&D Communications at researchinfo@vard.org or (410) 962-1800, ext. 223.

Next R&D Hotline Conference
Call: July 9, 12 – 12:50 p.m.
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